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ABSTRACT

The relationships among mass media, interpersonal communication, and voting behavior were explored in a two-stage panel study of 141 respondents during a 1974 Illinois congressional election. Analyses of perceived exposures to mass media and to interpersonal communication were interpreted as supporting Rogers and Shoemakers' (1971) innovation-decision-making model as a structure for studying electoral behavior and political communication. (AA)

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MEDIA EXPOSURE, INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION AND THE ELECTORAL DECISION PROCESS

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MEDIA EXPOSURE, INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION AND THE ELECTORAL DECISION PROCESS

Introduction

In attempting to explain the relationships between communication and voting behavior, several scholars have suggested that the electoral decision process might be viewed as a form of innovation-decision making. Generally, innovation-decision studies concern themselves with how the individual goes about deciding whether or not to make use of a new object, such as hybrid seed corn or the birth control pill. However, the basic model may be applicable to other decisional environments.

The decision to vote for a political candidate is perhaps analogous to the decision to adopt an innovation. Rogers and Shoemaker (1971) indicated that their model is applicable to the electoral process. Sanders and Kraus (1973) suggested that such an application would be a valuable contribution to the understanding of the political communication process.

Rogers and Shoemaker (1971) provide a structure, in the form of sets of empirically derived propositions, for the analysis of communication variables in decisional contexts. This paper applies two of these propositions to electoral decision making. Rogers and Shoemaker reported a

substantial number of studies which conclude that individuals who adopt an innovation early in the persuasive campaign associated with the object of innovation tend to be different from individuals who adopt the innovation later in several specific ways particularly more media exposure. This paper posits that earlier adopters of innovations are very much like individuals who decide for whom they will vote early in the campaign, and that late adopters of innovations tend to be like individuals who decide for whom to vote late in the campaign.

These relationships were tested by comparing the perceived exposure to communication media and interpersonal contacts of decided versus undecided voters at two points in time, one month before the election and one week before the election. The hypotheses for this study are derived substantially from the generalizations reported by Rogers and Shoemaker (1971). The hypotheses for this study were:

> HYPOTHESIS 1. The amount of perceived exposure to mass media for early deciders will be significantly greater than the amount of perceived exposure for late deciders.
>
> HYPOTHESIS 2. The amount of perceived exposure to interpersonal communication channels for early deciders will be significantly greater than the amount of perceived exposure for late deciders.

Methodology

The data used in this study were gathered in a study of the 1974 Election in the Illinois 24th Congressional Congressional District. The sample consisted of 500

subjects selected at random from the telephone directories of the five counties comprising over sixty per cent of the population of the district. The sample was stratified proportionally by county. The respondents were interviewed by telephone at two points in time. Only individuals who reported that they were registered voters and who indicated that they intended to vote were interviewed. Time one occurred during the first week of October, 1974 and time two occurred during the week preceding the election on November 5. Of the original sample drawn, 141 subjects provided complete data on both waves. The telephone interviews averaged 12 minutes in length.

For this analysis, only the questions regarding perceived exposure to communication media and interpersonal communication were analyzed. Those questions required the individual to estimate the number of times he or she could recall seeing or hearing something in the newspaper, on television, on the radio or in a conversation about Paul Simon (the Democratic candidate) or his campaign. The format of the questions was: "How many times have you seen something about Paul Simon or his campaign on television?" This was also asked for newspapers, radio and conversations.

The hypotheses were tested in the following manner: (a) a series of t-tests were used to compare the mean number of perceived exposures to media for decided voters at time one to undecided voters at time one; decided voters at time two to undecided voters at time two; decided voters at time one to decided voters at time two and undecided voters

at time one to undecided voters at time two. (b) a series of t-tests were used to compare the mean number of perceived interpersonal communication encounters for the four pairs of groups listed above.

Results

Early campaign: Early versus late deciders. Using t-test it was found that the number of perceived exposures to communication media for decided voters during the week one month prior to the election is significantly greater than the number of perceived exposures to communication media for undecided voters at that time (see Table 1).

TABLE 1

Communication Exposure For
Decided and Undecided Voters
Early in the Campaign

decided	undecided	std. error	df	t-value
3.67	1.77	1.08	139	1.76
(n=89)	(n=52)		(n=141)	(p<.05)

These results support the findings of Rogers and Shoemaker (1971), and place those findings in a political context. That is, early adopters of innovations tend to expose themselves to communication media significantly more than

late adopters. In the innovation-decision context these results indicated that the individual has reached the ''decisional stage'' of the process. That is, the decided voters early in the campaign have already been exposed to the innovation (knowledge stage), which in this context is the candidate, and the individual has formed attitudes about the candidate (persuasion stage). This analysis suggests that one month before the election undecided voters are either in the knowledge or persuasion stage.

Late campaign: Early versus late deciders. Using t-tests it was found that the number of perceived exposures to communication media for decided voters during the week of the election is not significantly different from the perceived exposures to communication media for undecided voters at that time (see Table 2).

TABLE 2

Communication Exposure For
Decided and Undecided Voters
Late in the Campaign

decided	undecided	std. error	df	t-value
12.2	11.04	3.72	139	1.16
(n=35)	(n=106)		(N=141)	(p>.05)

These results suggest that the undecided voter one week

before the election is not exposed to more communication than the decided voter at that time. In terms of information flow from the candidates and the media, it is quite clear that there is more of an opportunity for exposure to political communication at this point in time than at earlier points in the campaign. With the campaign intensifying as it draws to a close, the individual who has decided to vote but does not yet know for whom, is just entering the decisional stage. The decided voter, on the other hand, is in the confirmational stage of the decisional process, and thus tends to seek information only in a reinforcement mode.

Examining the comparisons made early in the campaign in light of the findings of the comparison late in the campaign, it appears that the difference between decided and undecided voters tends to become smaller as the point of decision (election day) draws nearer. In order to examine this phenomenon more closely, two additional analyses were conducted.

It is apparent that the political communication environment of the individual one month before the election is different from that during the week of the election. Differences in political information flow across these time periods were observed by Hantz and Kimsey (1976) and Sanders and Atwood (1975).

Early deciders over time. A significant difference was observed between decided voters one month before the election and decided voters during the week before the

election (see Table 3).

TABLE 3

Communication Exposure For
Decided Voters Early
And Late In the Campaign

late	early	std. error	df	t-value
11.04	3.67	1.7	193	4.23
(n=106)	(n=89)		(N=195)	(p<.05)

These results suggest that those individuals who have decided early in the campaign continue to expose themselves to political communication after making the decision. This behavior is consistent with that posited by the confirmational stage of the Rogers and Shoemaker model (1971).

Late deciders over time. A significant difference was found for undecided voters early in the campaign and undecided voters late in the campaign (see Table 4).

TABLE 4

Communication Exposure For
Undecided Voters Early
And Late in the Campaign

late	early	std. error	df	t-value
12.2	1.77	3.8	85	2.72
(n=52)	(n=35)		(N=87)	(p<.05)

These results indicate that the undecided voter (the late adopter) reacts to the information in the environment such that as election day draws nearer, and more information is placed in the environment by the media and the candidates the late adopter pays more attention to those stimuli.

Early campaign: Early versus late deciders. In testing the second hypothesis, the same sets of tests were applied to early and late adopters at the two points in time, and similar results were obtained. It was found that the perceived exposure to interpersonal communication channels for decided voters one month before the election is significantly greater than the amount of perceived exposure for undecided voters at that time (see Table 5).

TABLE 5

Interpersonal Communication Exposure
For Decided and Undecided Voters
Early in the Campaign

decided	undecided	std. error	df	t-value
.845	.096	.43	139	1.74
(n=89)	(n=52)		(N=141)	(p<.05)

These results are consistent with those reported by Rogers and Shoemaker (1971). The decided voter, because he has taken a position one month prior to election day is probably called upon to defend that early decision by his family, friends and co-workers. The undecided voter; however, is probably not yet concerned enough about the election to initiate a significant amount of interpersonal interaction, and unlike the decided voter, he has no set position that can be challenged in every day conversation.

Late campaign: Early versus late deciders. No support was found that perceived exposure to interpersonal communication channels for decided voters is significantly different from that of undecided voters during the week before the election (see Table 6).

TABLE 6

Interpersonal Communication Exposure For
Decided and Undecided Voters
Late in the Campaign

decided	undecided	std. error	df	t-value
2.2	.343	.92	139	1.36
(n=106)	(n=35)		(N=141)	(p>.05)

These results are similar to those found in the earlier analysis of mass media exposure. Just as mass media information in the environment is greater as the election draws nearer, it would seem that the interpersonal communication increases also, and that even the individual who is as yet undecided is effected by this increase. It is interesting to note that some individuals are using information to confirm a decision already made, while others are using information from the same environment as the actual basis of their decision. This suggests that the increase in political communication output in both mass and interpersonal channels may serve to "homogenize" the environment in which decisions are being made. That is, while the amount of information tends to expand over time, the content of that information tends to contract. Some support for this notion was observed by Hantz and Kimsey (1976). Their study examined the content of the agenda for decided and undecided voters over time.

Early deciders over time. A significant difference was found between decided voters one month before the election and decided voters during the week of the election (see Table 7).

TABLE 7

Interpersonal Communication Exposure For Decided Voters Early And Late In the Campaign

late	early	std. error	df	t-value
2.2	.854	.38	193	3.62
(n=106)	(n=89)		(N=195)	(p<.05)

These results are similar to the findings for mass media exposure. In the innovation-decision context this analysis suggests that the decided voter continues to seek reinforcement and confirmation of his decision in his conversations with other people.

Late deciders over time. A significant difference was found between undecided voters one month before the election and undecided voters during the week of the election (see Table 8).

TABLE 8

Interpersonal Communication Exposure
For Undecided Voters Early And
Late In the Campaign

late	early	std. error	df	t-value
.94	.096	.4	85	2.11
(n=35)	(n=52)		(n=87)	(p<.05)

These results provide further support for the explanation posited with regard to the mass media and late deciders. As election day draws nearer, and the amount of information in the environment is increasing, the voters in the decisional stage tend to communicate more frequently with others about the election.

Summary and Conclusions

This study was an attempt to shed light on the relationship between the voter and the information environment in which his decisions are made. It was found that decided voters one month before the election had been exposed to more information than had undecided voters in both mass media and interpersonal channels. However, one week before the election no difference was found between decided and undecided voters in terms of exposure to mass media and interpersonal information.

It is interesting to note that a significant increase in perceived exposure to both mass media and interpersonal information was found for both groups over time. This suggests that as the amount of information in the environment increases, so does the amount of information to which voters expose themselves, regardless of whether they have made up their minds. However, between the decided and undecided groups there is a significant difference early in the campaign but no difference late in the campaign. This suggests that the increase over time in communication exposure for undecided voters is much more dramatic. The decided voter is probably engaged in confirmational information seeking while the undecided voter, having become interested in the election later in the campaign, is still in the earlier stages of the decisional process and must catch up so that a decision can be made by or on election day.

It is here that a major difference is found between the electoral decision process and the usual innovation-decision process. The individual must decide whether or not to adopt the innovation in the context of a fixed point of decision, that is election day. Once the ballot has been cast, the individual must accept his decision until the next election. This fact provides a decision pressure not found in most other decisional environments. This study has nevertheless provided some evidence to support the propositions of the innovation-decision model as a structure for studying electoral behavior and political communication.

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